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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complexities of educational and social conditions encountered by black males, examining the possibilities and limits of comprehensive high school reform strategies in overcoming the negative effects of barriers such as concentrated poverty and ineffective public schools for black adolescents. The paper discusses: the disproportionate numbers of black male students placed at risk of school failure and diminishing life chances; trends in comprehensive high school reform; principles of high school reform; the role of comprehensive school reform in rescuing black males; the need for black male teachers to educate black male students; teacher-student cultural congruence; interpersonal teacher-student relations; and the importance of appropriate staffing for educational reform. The paper notes the importance of simultaneously strengthening the communities within which schools are located and working to reform the schools. It explains that the missing components of comprehensive school reform are lack of attention to the cultural uniqueness of black boys and paucity of black male teachers. It recommends that future research and policy should involve incorporating the recruitment of black male teachers into the development of comprehensive school reform initiatives, particularly at critical transition points of schooling. (Contains 50 references.) (SM)

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# Racial and Cultural Issues Related to Comprehensive School Reform:

# The Case of African American Males

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**Racial and Cultural Issues Related to Comprehensive School Reform:**

**The Case of African American Males**

Abstract

In response to unparallel federal support and public demand for improving high schools, an unprecedented number of comprehensive reform efforts have emerged in recent years. However, out of the many reform models, few explicitly confront unique social conditions, along with cultural responses to these conditions, facing Black males placed at risk of school failure. Despite well-intentioned best efforts to reform ineffective public high schools and bolster academic achievement for all students, there continues to be a lingering gap between middle class and poor students as well as White and Black students. To that end, this paper explores the complexities of educational and social conditions encountered by Black males. The authors examine the limits and possibilities of comprehensive high school reform strategies in overcoming the negative effects of intractable barriers such as concentrated poverty and ineffective public schools for Black adolescents. We conclude that, while currents trends in comprehensive school reform reflect responsible policy and practice, issues of cultural relevancy and teacher-student cultural synchronization are largely ignored. Thus, we recommend linking the comprehensive school reform debate to policy and research on teacher recruitment, with a specific focus on bringing in Black male teachers.

In response to unparallel federal support and public demand for improving high schools, an unprecedented number of comprehensive reform efforts have emerged in recent years. Many schools are engaged in comprehensive reform efforts as they relate to shared governance (Murphy, 1991), assessment and accountability (Kean, 1996), and curriculum/instruction (Slavin, et al., 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997). However, few reform models explicitly confront the unique condition facing Black males placed at risk of school failure. Despite best efforts to reform ineffective schools and bolster academic achievement for all students there continues to be a lingering outcome gap between middle class and poor students as well as White and Black students (Jencks and Phillips, 1998). Public education in the United States, over a half century since the *Brown* decision, remains unequal to the degree that Black children and adolescents continue to lag behind White students in school performance and educational attainment. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that students of color are more likely to be taught by less experienced, less educated, and less enthusiastic teachers, and to attend deteriorating schools that are both racially and economically isolated (Kozol, 1991).

Furthermore, the extant literature suggests the greatest and most persistent lag is that which affects Black males (Gibbs; 1988; Irvine, 1990; Polite and Davis, 1999). According to Garibaldi (1992), education statistics consistently reveal that Black males tend to cluster at the bottom of the distribution of virtually every indicator of school failure such as dropout, absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, and low achievement.

Black adolescents, on average, disproportionately attend large, urban comprehensive or "zoned" schools that are racially isolated and enroll high concentrations of low-SES students. Academic achievement and graduation rates at such schools are often very low. In the worst cases, fewer than one quarter of the student body reaches twelfth grade on time (Balfanz and Legters, 1998).

An added complexity of high schools serving Black adolescents is that they are often located in communities having relatively few financial resources, political clout, or social capital.

It is important to stress that education is not the only social institution without resources and power. In other words, high schools serving Black students are disproportionately embedded in communities that have endured generations of poverty and racial isolation. Intergenerational poverty and cyclical racial isolation have had devastating effects on education, public health, employment, and the like. These communities are marred by multiple social ills such as violence and crime, unemployment, drug abuse, poor public health, and teenage childbirth–along with an educational system that reproduces social inequality, rather than transform it. Unfortunately, as argued by Jencks and his colleagues (1972), schools have historically legitimated inequality to a far greater extent than they have fostered true social mobility.

In light of the intractable nature of concentrated poverty and racial isolation, many scholars and educators have concluded that nothing can be done within the context of the existing educational system to significantly improve the conditions for poor students in general and Black males in particular. As a result, some have advocated for establishing innovative all-male academies addressing the unique needs of Black males and to buffer them from potential pitfalls. Although controversial, several such academies have been created over the past decade, beginning in the Milwaukee Public School District and spreading to other districts throughout the nation. However, the short-term and long-term success of Black male academies has not been well established. But how and why did Black males become a segment of our population who are conspicuously at-risk and why does their level of school failure persist? In addition, why haven't notable policy and practice responses to the achievement crisis among Black males been effective on a large scale? In this paper, we explore these questions, paying particular attention to Black males in high school and the limits and possibilities of the comprehensive school reform movement in altering their educational success, and ultimately their life chances.

## An "Endangered Species": Young, Black Males

Collectively speaking, Black boys and young men are disproportionately placed at risk of school failure and diminishing life chances. Yet they have not been the subject of such attention and concern since the "lynching debates" of the early twentieth century (Harris and Duhon, 1999). Unfortunately, much of the attention and study has chronicled the troubled status of Black males in school and in social life. In the mid-1980s, several authors referred to Black males as "endangered species" (Hare, 1987; Hare and Castenell, 1985; Gibbs, 1988). Compared to other groups, Blacks have higher dropout rates, lower standardized achievement scores, higher suspension and expulsion rates, the highest infant mortality rates, and the shortest life expectancy (Gibbs, 1998). In addition, several scholars have documented that Black males are more likely than members of other racial and gender categories to be unemployed, underemployed, or incarcerated.

What has been the impact of the experiences of Black males on the development of their identity and self-concept? Whether it is perceived failure in the labor market or in educational pursuits, Black males are socialized to view their self-worth as being somewhat less than others (Hare, 1988) and their locus of control is relatively lower (Parrot, 1984). Perhaps the social institution that contributes most flagrantly to the destruction of the aspirations of Black boys is the public education system (Kunjufu, 1986). Kunjufu contends that educational institutions historically have established myriad vehicles denying Black males equal access to opportunity. Tracking and ability-grouping, special education, and standard testing are examples of structural educational barriers. In some cases, learning and school engagement gaps between Black boys and other groups can be observed as early as the fourth grade. Unfortunately, many Black males never recover from the initial slippage and are relegated to a poor quality education with few chances for upward mobility. Thus, considering the normative cultural values embedded in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society, Black males have come to resemble an endangered species. The endangered status of Black males

results from a combination of institutional racism, the inertia of inter-generational poverty, and an inability to execute and sustain meaningful educational reform and community development. In the crudest sense, and with the exception of socially acceptable figures such Michael Jordan, Mohammed Ali, and Colin Powell, young Black males are largely perceived and stereotyped by one or more of the five Ds: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed (Gibbs, 1988). Although these words are seldom spoken or written, they reflect mainstream cultural values and are often reflected in educational policy and practice.

## Trends in Comprehensive High School Reform

For the past decades, terms such as school reform, restructuring, redesign, and improvement have dominated educational discourse regarding possible ways of affecting meaningful, fundamental changes in the schooling experience for students placed at risk. Research suggests that these initiatives emerged in several waves (Lusi, 1997). The early waves focused directly upon raising standards. Failing schools were often asked to work harder at doing more of the same, without any new innovations apart from the traditional models (Petrie, 1990). This approach, however, neglects systemic complexities of the educational enterprise. Thus, reform strategies of this sort were often characterized as piecemeal and disconnected (Cohen and Spillane 1992; Smith and O'Day, 1990) because they do little more than tinker with an essentially defective system. For example, prior research suggests early reform efforts left the fundamental nature of teaching and learning unchanged (Cohen, 1988; Cuban, 1990; Firestone et al., 1989).

Subsequent waves of reform shifted the focus to the redistribution of management and decision-making, or similarly, authority and accountability (Murphy, 1992). Here, educational reformers sought to decentralize control of curriculum/instruction and management to the local level (Clune and White, 1988; Elmore and McLaughlin, 1988). The ideas of site-based management and shared decision-making, along with the notion of enterprise schools, are examples of this. A great strength, and tremendous weakness, of reforms of this nature is that

school principals are ultimately held responsible for all aspects of education occurring in their schools. To be successful, principals had to not only perform the duties of instructional leaders but also business managers, arbitrators, procurement officers, head counselors, and peacekeepers. The goals of these reforms were noble: "to capitalize on the energy and creativity of individuals at the school level" (Murphy, 1992, p. 6). However, over time, the pendulum swung the other direction and many districts and school have restocked their central administrative offices.

Comprehensive high school reform represents the current wave of reforms. Comprehensive reform is whole-school reform aimed at improving the quality of education for at-risk students by altering the deepest organizational structures (Murphy, 1992). Traditional notions of high school structure and functions are abandoned in this model. In addition, the primary function of educational reform is no longer the maintenance of an ineffective, antiquated organizational infrastructure, but rather the development of innovative and fundamentally different American high schools (Mojkowski and Fleming, 1988).

As mentioned above, recent review of the literature by Jordan and his colleagues (2000), identified three critical components of successful comprehensive school reform models in high school: (1) structural reforms; (2) curriculum and instruction reforms; and (3) professional development reforms. The Talent Development High School (*TDHS*) represents a recent attempt by educational researchers and practitioners to simultaneously develop these three components in troubled high schools. *TDHS* is a research-based comprehensive school reform design model created by researchers at Howard University and Johns Hopkins University. It features a package of reform initiatives such as ninth grade academies, career academies in the upper grades, interdisciplinary teacher teaming, modified school governance structures, extended instructional periods, double-dose instruction in core subjects, curriculum innovations in math and English, and ongoing professional development and training of teachers and school leaders.

Regarding these critical components of comprehensive reform, structural reforms refer to policies and strategies aimed at changing the social and/or physical organization of the school. They include various initiatives such as career academies, smaller learning communities, extended instructional periods, reduced class size, interdisciplinary teacher teams and block scheduling. Curriculum and instructional reform refers to attempts to improve the content and delivery of academic subjects. These include innovative ways of teaching math and English as well as infusing culturally relevant pedagogy and literature into academic courses. Finally, ongoing professional development refers to any number of training activities for teachers and school leaders aimed at helping them to address changing dynamics. There is some agreement among researchers that the likelihood of a successful reform increases in cases where all three aspects are taken into account.

A persuasive argument can be made that altering school norms and creating a new culture is itself an important component of comprehensive school reform. In breaking a large school down into smaller learning communities or by establishing interdisciplinary teams of teachers having common planning time, new patterns of relationships and normative structures emerge. For example, when large poorly managed schools, overrun by chaos, are restructured into self-contained, smaller learning communities, expectations for teachers and students are affected by this structural shift. Because smaller elementary and high schools are easier to manage, chaos becomes order (Lee and Loeb, 2000). It becomes easier for teachers and administrators in smaller environments to not only learn the names of all the students they interact with during the day, but also to know something about what motivates them. This facilitates creating a new culture and climate within the school consisting of both a warm and caring environment for student as well as academic press. The emerging school climate is a clearly identifiable goal of comprehensive school reform.

Principles of High School Reform

At the high school level, comprehensive school reform has focused primarily upon policies and practices aimed at universally improving educational quality in failing schools. The often cited *Breaking Ranks* report (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996) suggests that there are perhaps hundreds of challenges facing high schools and any number of critical goals could be focused upon by a school or district vying for improvement. But several core themes are laid out in *Breaking Ranks* that are central to any short list of school reform initiatives. These themes, or guiding principles, include the following statements:

- High school is, above all else, a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with standards that can stand up to national scrutiny.
- High school must function as a transitional experience, getting each student ready for the next stage of life, whatever it may be for that individual, with the understanding that, ultimately, each person needs to earn a living.
- High school must be a gateway to multiple options.
- High school must prepare each student to be a lifelong learner.
- High school must provide an underpinning for good citizenship and for full participation in the life of a democracy.
- High school must play a role in the personal development of young people as social beings who have needs beyond those that are strictly academic.
- High school must lay a foundation for students to be able to participate comfortably in an increasingly technological society.
- High school must equip young people for life in a country and a world in which interdependency will link their destiny to that of others, however different those others may be from them.
- High school must be an institution that unabashedly advocates in behalf of young

people.

Each of the above statements represents broad ideas or responsible goals for any high school attempting to prepare adolescents for higher education and adult life, apparently, irrespective of the cultural traditions of the students. We cite excerpts from *Breaking Ranks* not as hard and fast rules for governing high school reform, but instead as noteworthy pursuits for reform frequently appearing throughout the research and policy literature. We underscore the fact that while these guiding principles can be seen as goals of high school reform, no specific reference is made to whether or how racial-ethnic and gender issues influence or alter the implementation process.

The Role of Comprehensive School Reform in Rescuing Black Males

The existing educational literature contains a number of policy and practice recommendations for educating Black males that begs an important question: What can be done within the context of comprehensive school reform to bolster the overall achievement and school success for Black male students? While comprehensive school reform is gradually taking into account various strategies for improving school structure/organization, curriculum/instruction, professional development, and strategies to strengthen school climate, the issue of race and culture within the context of comprehensive reform has been largely ignored. In addition, the broader issue of how staffing effects a school's capacity for change has occurred separately from the discourse on comprehensive school reform. In this vein, we argue that if comprehensive high school reform is to make a positive difference in the overall schooling experiences of Black males two important topics must be addressed: (1) research and policy aimed specifically at the recruitment of Black male teachers; and (2) greater efforts to infuse research findings on cultural synchronization and race congruence into models of high school improvement and reform.

WANTED: Black Male Teachers to Teach Black Male Students

The current aim of the comprehensive high school reform has at least three basic components: (1) organizational/structural/climate reform; (2) curriculum/instructional reform; and (3) professional development (Jordan, et al., 2000). The rationale for organizational/ structural and climate reforms is the first step in improving a school is to create a context within which learning and school engagement is likely to take place. Second, in addition to establishing a school climate that is both nurturing and academically demanding of students, it is necessary to continually develop and refine the curricular and pedagogical techniques. Finally, asking teachers and school leaders to change core practices that they have grown accustomed to, and to adopt and sustain any reform, without well-defined plans for professional development weaves failure into any reform plan. Ongoing professional development of teachers and administrators is the essential glue holding effective comprehensive school reform models in place.

There is a disconnection between the discourse on comprehensive school reform and issues of teacher quality and recruitment. These topics however, school reform and staffing, are inextricably linked. Yet, many models of high school reform are asked to assume existing staffing levels. Concern is often focused upon policies and practices to be implemented such as building smaller learning communities and using cooperative learning techniques, with less attention being paid to the characteristics (both achieved and ascriptive) of the implementers. Teacher background characteristics such as gender and ethnicity/race, as well as their education, training and experience, are critical factors. To be fair, several scholars have written about the implications of cultural and social distances between students and teachers (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rist, 1970). Although Irvine (1990) suggests that "cultural synchronization" between students and teachers is a critical component of motivating Black students to achieve, this body of research has not sufficiently permeated the prevailing discussions of comprehensive school reform, at least not outside the domain of curriculum and

pedagogy.

The thrust of our position is prevailing models of comprehension school reform represent a responsible way of improving schools for most at-risk students. There is mounting evidence that student engagement and achievement is positively affected by improvements in school climate, curriculum and teaching, and professional development (Jordan et al., 2000). However, even as ineffective high schools get better, the distribution of equality within the school is relatively unaffected. In other words, as high schools begin to improve as a result of comprehensive whole-school reform the distribution of achievement remains largely unchanged. Although all students tend to show signs of improvement, the gap between Black males and other groups remain intact. In many respects, a rising tide lifts all ships but in the case of culturally-neutral school reform initiatives, Black male student achievement rises least.

We contend, therefore, that in order to advance research and development on the core principles of comprehensive school reform, the role of Black male teachers must be taken into account. This assertion is based upon theories of cultural synchronization, coupled with an understanding that overall teacher quality and effectiveness trumps racial congruence between students and teachers. In other words, an experienced and effective teacher of any racial background is preferable for raising achievement among Black male students than an ineffective Black teacher. However, having stated this, Black male teachers perhaps have several important advantages in educating Black boys. These include, for example, modeling appropriate behavior, strategic use of shared knowledge, and in some cases, common social experiences. The rapport Black male teachers establish with Black male students through their common cultural heritage can be maintained in the face of social class differences. Thus, in addition to raising the overall quality of the school through comprehensive reform, the value-added dimension of being exposed to good teachers who are Black males might be a factor in raising the success rates of Black male students.

## Teacher-Student Cultural Congruence

Several scholars have compiled experiential, practical and research-based strategies as well as policy recommendations for fostering academic achievement among African American students. (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lomotey, 1990; Shujaa, 1996; Willie et al., 1991). However, findings from this body of research have yet to fully permeate discussions of comprehensive school reform in a discernable manner. Perhaps one of the reasons why is because researchers and policymakers struggle with the implications of culturally relevant teaching and learning. On the one hand, there is general recognition by the educational research community that many Black children and adolescents may need potent interventions in order to succeed in school. Beliefs of this nature oftentimes translate into notions of whole-school reform and systemic reform. Yet, on the other hand, only courageous policymakers, researchers and practitioners strongly advocate for cultural congruence between students and teachers, or racially/culturally-specific, or targeted, curriculum and instruction. If, for example, exposing Black male students to Black male teachers who can act as role models and rapidly establish rapport and credibility with them is shown to be an effective strategy for bolstering student motivation, what are the implications of this vis-à-vis our current knowledge that, in the real-world, very few teachers of Black boys are Black men? Furthermore, what are potential ramifications of embracing the idea of cultural congruence within the context of a pluralistic society that ostensibly values and celebrates diversity? Answers to questions such as these may spawn several controversial research questions because they not only address how to improve student achievement and ameliorate the uneven failure of Black boys in school, but embedded in them are deep-seeded challenges to egalitarian values and opinions concerning the race relations in the United States.

The discourse on comprehensive school reform is occurring separate and apart from new knowledge about cultural relevancy and the education of Black children and adolescents. Perhaps this is a result of a widespread philosophy among school reformers that effective

education should be culturally-neutral, or benign neglect of the unique cultural needs of Black students in classrooms and schoolhouses. As stressed earlier, there is considerable evidence that issues of race and cultural background do, in fact, play key roles in the education of Black students (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995). Neglecting the role of culture in educating children and adolescents is explained by Irvine's notion of "cultural aversion," which she describes as a general reluctance of educators to consider race and race-related issues such as equality, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice. According to Irvine: "This color-blind philosophy is linked to educators' uncomfortableness in discussing race, their lack of knowledge of cultural heritage of their students' peers, and their fears and anxieties that open consideration of differences might incite racial discord or perhaps upset a fragile, often unpredictable, racial harmony" (1990/p. 26). There is a preference among many educators and policymakers to focus on the broad issues pertaining to school reform and improvement, as if they were devoid of cultural implications.

To be sure, increasing achievement and school engagement for all students, regardless of racial background or gender, has been the impetus for comprehensive school reform. Ultimately, the primary aim of comprehensive school reform is to effect deep changes in the structure/organization, curriculum and teaching practices, and professional development agenda of schools serving students placed at risk of failure. Although there is a general understanding among educators, policymakers, and researchers that at-risk students are culturally and ethnically diverse as well as disproportionately Black, we have not yet developed adequate policies and practices for taking full advantage of students' cultural histories. While multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy/curriculum are steadily penetrating comprehensive school reform, there is little evidence of a significant impact upon the achievement and school success of Black males. Furthermore, the overall impact of comprehensive high school reform on closing the gaps between Black males and other groups of adolescents has not been established.

Still, as we mentioned above, there is considerable research evidence documenting and underscoring the importance of cultural relevancy in the education of Black students and fostering their school success (Boykin, 1987; Hopkins, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Irvine, 1990; and others). However, a real-world challenge for proponents of multicultural education and culturally relevant instruction/curriculum, along with proponents of comprehensive school reform is that many strategies assume existing school staff and resources. The reason why this assumption is made is out of the recognition that effective teachers and school leaders are in short supply and high demand. Moreover, the professional development of teachers around issues of cultural competence is labor-intensive, and rarely successful on a large scale. In addition, as standards for achievement continue to rise, schools and districts are increasingly opting to focus their professional development activities on subject or content-specific training, often linked to particular state, national or district assessments.

Interpersonal Relations Between Students and Teachers

Many studies have been conducted focusing upon micro-processes and student-teacher interactions within the classroom, along with the implications and effects of this interaction on student achievement and engagement. Studies addressing issues such as teacher expectancies (Dusek, 1975; Elashoff and Snow, 1971; Entwisle and Hayduk, 1978; Risk, 1970) and cultural synchronization (Irvine 1990) cast light on the degree to which ascriptive factors such as race-ethnicity, gender and social class can influence student learning. However, developing strategies for mitigating the effects of low expectancies, cultural ambivalence, or general misunderstandings between teachers and students can be a complicated and arduous task. In fact, success is often fleeting and difficult to sustain. This is primarily because attempts to change expectancies and cultural sensitivities cut to the core of teachers and other school personnel as individuals, as well as the social conditions students face in school and in their community. For example, in the case of at-risk Black male students, expectancies are often low because the resources teachers have at their disposal to bring to bear on the multiple

problems faced by them are woefully inadequate. Irrespective of what teachers may think about individual Black boys or African American males as a whole, they are keenly aware of the social, economic and political barriers to their success. Thus, there is a widespread belief that Black students in general must "beat the odds" if they are to graduate from high school and go to college.

## Staffing for Educational Reform is Essential

School reformers are often asked to assume current staffing resources in attempting to support failing schools. Moreover, struggling schools serving large percentages of at-risk students tend to have the most difficult time attracting and retaining effective teachers (Oakes, 1985 and 1986). But in a racialized society such as ours, cultural synchronization is important is an aspect schooling (Irvine, 1990). Teachers who have shared knowledge and understandings with students can be better equipped in solving students' problems and motivating them to learn.

Increasing the number of Black male teachers alone is not the answer. Instead, we suggest that shared cultural knowledge, generated by being a member of the same racial and gender group, can provide a value-added dimension of teaching and learning, holding constant a teacher's ability to teach, his or her educational credentials, and level of experience. Perhaps a wrinkle in this conjecture is that although Black male teachers and students may share common cultural experiences, teachers are virtually, by definition, middle class. Thus, complete cultural congruence or synchronization almost never exists. Still, there are many examples of racially isolated schools having many Black teachers, where Black male students consistently fail. Perhaps, here, the persistent under-performance of Black males can be explained by a combination of factors such as inadequate resources, unstable leadership, overall teacher quality and a host of student inputs, such as the intractable conditions brought on by poverty.

## Summary and Conclusion

Many Black male children and adolescents are placed at risk of educational failure as a result of a complex array of institutional and socioeconomic factors they face within their schools and the communities in which they live. These current social and educational conditions have historical implications, and indeed they are intergenerational. Thus, effective policies and strong interventions are needed to improve the plight of Black males in society. Within a broader framework, it is important to keep in mind that problems that manifest within school are not always school problems per se. Black boys are not only disproportionately at risk of school failure, but also many other outcomes such as infant mortality, poor public health, drug abuse, crime and legal problems, and unemployment (Gibbs, 1988). For this reason, multiple institutions serving Black communities must seek remedies for shrinking the social mobility gap between Black males and other groups. We are optimistic that of the institutions Black males encounter, schools, which are the sole compulsory institutions, currently appear to be the most malleable to change. Despite the challenges we outlined above, schools can be reformed and improved via policy and leadership that is guided by research and theory.

While there is cause for hope that schools attempting to prepare Black boys for adult life can be reformed into more effective organizations succeeding at helping greater numbers achieve social mobility, broader aspects of social life are more difficult to assess. There considerable evidence suggesting communities themselves and other social institutions such as the criminal justice system and public assistance agencies are far more resistant to change than schools. This is more apparent in racially isolated communities where concentrations of poverty have existed for generations. To be sure, the devastating effects of poverty are often intractable, not only for educators, but also for public health, social service, housing and workforce development agencies.

Because educational institutions alone are compulsory through age 16, they absorb a disproportionate responsibility for ameliorating the negative effects of inequality in society.

Conventional wisdom suggests one of the core purposes of schooling is to embody egalitarian principals such as democracy and the maintenance of an equal opportunity social structure. Schools should provide a vehicle of social mobility for poor and minority students, while helping middle class students reproduce their social status.

A caveat, however, is that many researchers view educational and social mobility is a zero-sum game (Jencks et al., 1972). Success for one individual reduces the probability of success for another. The institution of education mimics the economy in several respects, including its inverted pyramidal structure, having wide clusters of individuals at the bottom and few at the top (Hare, 1987). Many people earn high school diplomas, a smaller number have college degrees, fewer still earn masters degrees, and a relatively tiny percentage have earned doctorates or professional degrees. Similarly, there are many minimum wage workers and few millionaires. Thus, it is difficult to conceive of a truly egalitarian educational system that truly leaves no kid behind, without reconceptualizating broader social, economic, and political structures. Suppose, for example, that school dropout was eliminated and that every high school graduate was suddenly qualified to attend college. Even if this were to happen, we do not have a higher education infrastructure to support such an influx of new students.

Endeavoring to reform schools without simultaneously strengthening the community in which they are located in is like attempting to filter the air in a room having its doors and windows wide open (Anyon, 1995). As posited by Waller (1932) the community is the whole and the school is fragment. However, bureaucracy and institutionalism causes us to lose sight of the fragmentary nature of schooling in social life. As a result, school reform initiatives are often narrowly focused upon creating more effective schoolhouses, paying little attention to the demographics and cultural backgrounds of the student population. In the case of Black males, many reform agendas have missed the mark. Black males face daunting conditions and challenges in school just as they are at-risk in the larger spheres of society. It is perhaps due, in part, to historical and ongoing inequality and racism. The criminalization of Black males such





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as in racial profiling, continuing disparaging media images as challenged by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the over-representation of Black males in state and federal prisons are similar phenomena to educational at-riskness.

Finally, the current strategies often utilized in comprehensive high school reform represents a responsible, but incomplete, approach to addressing the needs of Black male adolescents. Certainly, the overall quality of a school as measured by its organization and climate, curriculum/instruction, and professional development are critical factors. Also, the quality, effectiveness, and commitment of teachers are paramount issues. But holding these things constant, the cultural issues affecting Black boys and teachers must be considered. At this point, the missing components of comprehensive school reform are the lack of attention paid to the cultural uniqueness of Black boys and the relative absence of Black male teachers at the head of the class.

We end this paper with a general recommendation for research and policy. That is, the aim of future research and policy ought to involve strategies of incorporating the recruitment of Black male teachers into the development of comprehensive school reform initiative, particularly at critical transition points of schooling. Some combination of new studies analyzing and synthesizing national and state statistics, along with qualitative case students would be needed to accomplish this. Ultimately, addressing this charge would involve merging at least two separate bodies of research literature that thus far is largely disconnected. Further research and development involving the potential value-added benefits of racial congruence and cultural synchronization for educating Black males would be insightful and may go a long way in refining models of comprehensive school reform and improving student outcomes.

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